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Authorship of the Pastoral Letters

Arguments for the Letters Being Pseudepigraphical

Scholars who argue that these letters are pseudonymous usually do so with reference to six key points.

The Language and Style Are Not Typical of Paul's Letters

First Timothy and Titus have no thanksgiving in their openings, which is out of character with Paul's letters (except for Galatians, where he seems to have omitted it in anger); likewise, they have no formal closing, other than a brief blessing. Furthermore, the vocabulary of the Pastoral Letters is strikingly different from that of other letters ascribed to Paul. In general, the Pastoral Letters employ a vocabulary closer to that of popular Greek philosophers and ethical teachers, whereas Paul's undisputed letters have more in common with the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament).

Curiously, the distinctive language of the Pastoral Letters bears many similarities to the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, and comparisons to the writings of second-century Christians are even more pronounced. This distinctive vocabulary might be explained as a result of Paul trusting an amanuensis with the task of composing the letters, but Paul uses secretaries for other letters without such noticeable effect. For example, Tertius serves as his amanuensis for Romans (Rom. 16:22), but the language and style of that letter is wholly compatible with other Pauline letters.

Certain Theological Ideas Are Different

Many scholars believe that numerous ideas are developed in the Pastoral Letters in ways that differ from or even conflict with what is found in letters universally acknowledged as Pauline. Salvation is linked to the epiphany (appearance) of Christ (1 Tim. 3:16; 2 Tim. 1:9–10; Titus 2:11; 3:4), while the cross and resurrection of Christ are virtually ignored (except for 2 Tim. 2:8). The Pastoral Letters speak of Christ in exalted language: Jesus is not just “Lord”; he is “King of kings and Lord of lords” (1 Tim. 6:15) and he is “our great God and Savior” (Titus 2:13).

In another vein, words such as “righteousness” and “faith” are used here in a way that accents the human dynamic (“right behavior,” “correct belief”) rather than an activity of God that inspires trust. And in general terms, the Pastoral Letters seem to betray an increased sense of accommodation with the world. They envision Christianity as making a home for itself in Roman society, achieving social respectability, and settling in for the long haul. This might be at odds with the usual perspective of Paul, who thought that the end of all things was near (1 Cor. 7:29–31; 1 Thess. 4:16–18 [but see 1 Tim. 4:1–5]).

The Description of Church Government Seems Too Developed for Paul’s Lifetime

The Pastoral Letters seem to envision a broader and more securely established role for authority figures in the church than we encounter in other letters attributed to Paul. In 1 Timothy and Titus we hear a great deal about bishops, elders, and other officials who seem to be in charge of numerous ecclesiastical functions (1 Tim. 3:1–13; 5:3–22; 2 Tim. 2:2; Titus 1:5–7). We know from later Christian writings (*1 Clement*, the *Didache*,

Ignatius) that such offices did develop as the church became more institutionalized, but our usual perception is that things were a bit looser during the time of Paul. The overall picture for Paul's day is one in which all members use their diverse gifts for the benefit of the community (Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:27–28) and reputed leaders are regarded with an element of suspicion (Gal. 2:6).

Of course, Paul's letters do contain some references to church leaders (Rom. 12:8; 1 Thess. 5:12–13), and Paul even mentions “bishops and deacons” in Philippians 1:1 (see EXPLORE 18.11). However, he never appeals to these leaders for help in resolving the various problems that arise within his churches, and this leads many scholars to believe that the offices were not as well developed as they appear to be in the Pastoral Letters.

The Nature of the False Teaching Is Distinctive

All three Pastoral Letters exhibit a concern to stop the spread of false teaching within the church (1 Tim. 1:3–7; 6:3–5; 2 Tim. 2:17–18; 3:6–9; 4:3–4; Titus 1:9–16). The exact nature of this teaching is unclear, but it seems to have certain points in common with gnosticism, a religious system that posed a serious challenge to Christianity in the second century, but not much before then (see “On the Horizon: Gnosticism” in chap. 1). Some sort of proto-gnostic ideology may have been around earlier, but scholars question whether such thinking would have been prominent in Christian churches at the time of Paul. It seems odd, at least, that these ideas would be regarded as a major threat in the Pastoral Letters but not be treated as a potential problem in other letters attributed to Paul.

The Manner of Dealing with False Teaching Is Not Characteristic of

Paul

Usually when Paul believes that a church has been led astray by false teachers, he writes to the church as a whole (see Galatians, 2 Corinthians) rather than to an individual. More to the point, he usually seeks to refute objectionable ideas with cogent arguments, often drawn from Scripture (see, e.g., Rom. 3–6; Gal. 3–4). The Pastoral Letters seem more inclined simply to label ideas as acceptable or unacceptable and then to call on church leaders to preserve what is regarded as sound doctrine and reject what is not (1 Tim. 4:1; 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:13–14; 2:2; 4:2–3; Titus 2:1; 3:9–11). It would be an exaggeration to claim that the Pastoral Letters offer no substantive arguments to refute what is objectionable (see 1 Tim. 1:8; 4:3–5, 7–8; 6:5–10), but they do not engage the opposition in the manner exhibited by Paul in Galatians 3–4 or 2 Corinthians 10–13. Five times in these letters a formulaic phrase is used: “the saying is sure” (1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8). This phrase never occurs in any other writings attributed to Paul, and it seems to express a reliance on confessional material that has achieved a certain level of authority within the church.

Historical Circumstances Presumed for the Letters Do Not Find Support Elsewhere

The letters addressed to these individuals presume particular situations in the life of Paul that do not seem to fit with what we know of Paul’s career from his other letters and from the book of Acts:

The letter addressed to Titus presumes that Paul and Titus have been ministering together in Crete but that Paul has left, entrusting Titus to continue the work (1:5). He is now writing to Titus from some unspecified location (possibly Ephesus), and he plans to spend the winter in Nicopolis,

where he hopes Titus will be able to join him (3:12). We have no knowledge, however, of Paul ever being in Crete. The only mention of that island elsewhere is found in the book of Acts, when a ship on which Paul is a prisoner sails past Crete on the way to Rome (Acts 27:7–16).

The letter known as 1 Timothy presumes that Paul and Timothy have been ministering together in Ephesus, and that Paul has now left there for Macedonia; he is writing back to Timothy, who is now in charge of the Ephesian church (1:3). At first this seems sensible, because Paul did spend almost three years in Ephesus during his third missionary journey (in the mid-50s), and he did go to Macedonia from there (Acts 20:1–3). According to Acts, however, Timothy had already left Ephesus by this time (Acts 19:21–22). Paul may have also traveled from Ephesus to Macedonia around the time he wrote 2 Corinthians (see 2 Cor. 1:16; 2:12–13; 7:5–6), but again, Timothy appears to have accompanied him on that trip (2 Cor. 1:1).

The letter known as 2 Timothy presumes that Paul is in prison (1:16; 2:9; 4:16) in Rome (1:17), where he expects to be executed (4:6); he wants Timothy (whose whereabouts are unspecified) to come to him, passing through Troas on the way (4:9, 13). Of the situations proposed for each of the three Pastoral Letters, this one is the most tenable. Paul was indeed imprisoned in Rome and executed there. Some scholars, however, think that some of the letters coauthored by Timothy were written from Rome (Philippians, Colossians, Philemon). If so, Timothy would have already been with Paul during the first part of his Roman imprisonment (before he knew that he was to be executed [cf. Phil. 1:25; Philem. 22 with 2 Tim. 4:6, 16]).

Most scholars are willing to admit that no one of these six points would, on its own, lead to a necessary conclusion that Paul did not write the Pastoral Letters. Each point can be explained in terms that allow for Pauline authorship. Still, the cumulative effect of considering all the points together leads the majority of scholars to posit a likelihood that the letters were written twenty or more years after Paul's death. Thus they would be pseudepigraphical compositions, probably by someone within the Pauline tradition who wanted to honor his mentor and keep the tradition alive for a new generation.

Arguments against the Letters Being Pseudepigraphical

Scholars who favor Pauline authorship are in a minority, but their numbers have been increasing in recent years. They tend to offer arguments under three headings.

The Apparent Anomalies Can Be Explained

Literary and linguistic differences may be accounted for by a heavier reliance on an amanuensis (or reliance on a different amanuensis) for these letters than for others. Likewise, the letters are directed to individuals rather than to congregations, which may affect their style. Claims that the letters are theologically inconsistent with Paul's thinking or historically incompatible with his biography presume a more systematic and comprehensive account of Paul's life and thought than we actually possess.

The Suggestion of Pseudepigraphy Is Illogical

It seems unlikely that an author producing pseudepigraphical Pauline letters would create letters so obviously different from Paul's known writings. Why

would such an author compose letters to individuals when Paul was known for writing letters to churches? Why posit settings for the letters that didn't fit with Paul's known biography? Why not pick more plausible settings mentioned in the book of Acts? Why present Paul as greeting individuals not mentioned anywhere else (the Pastoral Letters refer to fifteen persons not mentioned in any other New Testament writing)?

The Decision in Favor of Pseudepigraphy May Be Ideologically Driven

Scholars who favor Pauline authorship sometimes claim that allegations of pseudepigraphy for these letters are fueled by ideological resistance to their content. Early on, the scholars who said that these letters were pseudepigraphical often were Protestants who saw the positive appraisal of church hierarchies in these letters as a step away from the pure gospel toward "early catholicism." More recently, scholars who object to the problematic nature of certain passages in the letters (e.g., the silencing of women in 1 Tim. 2:8–15) are said to favor pseudepigraphy under a tacit assumption that this renders the letters less reliable or authoritative.

Compromise Proposals

Finally, two ideas that present something of a compromise with regard to Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Letters.

Expansions of Personal Notes

Some scholars have suggested that although the Pastoral Letters as we have them are pseudepigraphical, they may be expansions of personal notes that Paul actually did write to his colleagues. This could explain some of the personal touches in the letters (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:18–20; 3:14–15; 2 Tim.

1:16–18; 4:9–21; Titus 3:12–15), passages that do not otherwise seem to serve much purpose.

2 Timothy as Authentic

A recent trend in scholarship has sought to separate 2 Timothy from the other two Pastoral Letters and regard it alone as an authentic Pauline composition. Many of the points raised above in support of pseudepigraphy actually apply to 1 Timothy or Titus but not to 2 Timothy. Thus some scholars maintain that 2 Timothy is judged to be pseudepigraphical only because it suffers from “suspicion by association.” The usual logic has been that if the three letters come from the same author, and if 1 Timothy and Titus are pseudepigraphical, then 2 Timothy must be pseudepigraphical as well.

An alternative proposal now contends that Paul could have written 2 Timothy, and then some pseudonymous author could have used 2 Timothy as his model or template to create the other two letters. This would account for the similarities between 2 Timothy and the other two pseudepigraphical letters while allowing the least problematic of the three Pastoral Letters to be regarded as an authentic letter of Paul.

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